

Preface

Tutto mi transferisco in loro
(Machiavelli)

In his *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art* (Columbia, Missouri and London 1978), Paul Barolsky draws attention to a painting by the Ferrarese artist Dosso Dossi in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. He remarks:

The picture, which is presumed to have astrological significance, conceivably alluding to the artist's birthdate, and which is also perhaps based on a dialogue of Lucian, reveals to us the improbable image of the mighty, all-powerful *Jupiter tuonans* [sic] so absorbed in his painting of delicate butterflies that he is too busy to hear the pleas of the virtuous virgin. Meanwhile, Mercury mediates between the two figures by indicating to the virgin that she should maintain silence. The tone of the painting, notwithstanding its pathos, is delicately mock-heroic, like Ariosto's poetry which gently parodies the pomp and prowess of chivalric heroes. In its mixture of pathos and comedy, Dosso's painting seems almost to evoke the great comic mythologies later painted by Velasquez.

The allusion to Lucian here is not directly to a dialogue by the Greek satirist, but to the brief Renaissance work *Virtus Dea*, interpolated into the Latin translation of parts of Lucian by various hands first published in Venice in 1494. Virtue complains there to Mercury that although she has been assaulted in the Lower World by Fortune, who has left her "prostrate in the mud," the gods have no leisure to listen to her complaints, since they are either busy making sure that the gourds bloom in time, or taking care that the butterflies have beautiful painted wings (*curare ut papilionibus alae perpulchrae pictae adsint*).

Mercury answers that even Jupiter fears to challenge Fortune.

Virtue despondently rejoins that she must go away "naked and despised" (*nuda et despecta abeo*).

Dosso's imagination may or may not have been stimulated by this short dialogue. If it was, his painting goes far beyond its supposed original. The student of the Classics will immediately observe that a Jupiter painting butterflies is engaged in the task of creating souls, into whom enter all the colors of the rainbow, Iris, the messenger of the gods; according to one ancient poet, the mother of Eros. In the picture the rainbow seems to blend into the artist's canvas. Mercury, whose *caduceus* is prominently displayed, is in attendance in his capacity as *psychopompus*, because it will be his duty to escort these souls to the world of men. He bids Virtue fall silent, because "holy silence," a profoundly religious concept still surviving in Christian observance, is appropriate to Jupiter's sacred task. It is this liturgical gesture, to which the *Virtus Dea* makes no allusion, which becomes the center of the composition, and on it W. B. Yeats' poem *Long-legged Fly* forms the best commentary.

Virtue in the painting is not "naked and despised." She certainly does not look as if she has just lost a tussle with Fortune and her minions. Serious of expression, yet garlanded with flowers, she represents the other end of the time-scale. She arrives with news of victories won by heroic souls who have accepted her guidance. Yet even her *praeconia* must remain unspoken in the presence of the Demiurge. Past and future meet in the symbolic *now* of this still eternity, in which the painter glorifies his own art as the model of the Creator's.

What Dosso has done here is to offer the paradigm of Renaissance, and indeed all creative, response to antiquity. On the surface, his painting departs even further from whatever ancient content the parody of Lucian, found in the *Virtus Dea*, may embody. In fact, he has taken this ironic parable explaining the slights suffered by Virtue at the hands of Fortune, and re-interpreted it at a level which brings him into far profounder contact with classical antiquity than his scholarly, but essentially superficial, original.

Dosso could find this *point d'appui* for his imagination in classical antiquity because he was a Renaissance man.

The degree of commitment which Renaissance artists and thinkers felt to the Classics is for us moderns difficult to grasp. In the letter to F. Vettori from which the epigraph above is taken Machiavelli writes:

Venuta la sera, mi ritorno in casa, ed entro nel mio scrittoio; e in su l'uscio mi spoglio quella vesta cotidiana, piena di fango e di loto, e

mi metto panni reali e curiali; e rivestito condecientemente, entro nelle antiche corti delli antiqui uomini, dove, da loro ricevuto amovoltamente, mi pasco di quel cibo, che solum è mio, e che io nacqui per lui; dove io non mi vergogno parlare con loro e domandarli della ragione delle loro azioni; e quelli per loro umanità mi rispondono; e non sento per quattro ore di tempo alcuna noia, sdimentico ogni affanno, non temo la povertà, non mi sbigottisce la morte; tutto mi transferisco in loro.

When evening comes, I return home, and enter my writing-room. At the door I take off these everyday clothes, full of mud and filth, and dress in royal, courtly garments. Clad fittingly, I enter the ancient courts of the men of old, and there find a kindly welcome. There I feed on that food which alone is mine, and for which I was born. There I am not ashamed to converse with them and ask the reasons for their actions. And they, in their humanity, give me answer, and for four hours I do not feel any vexation, I forget every toil, I do not fear poverty, I lose my dread of death. I transform myself entirely into them.

Machiavelli uses the word *umanità* in this letter of December 10, 1513, with good reason. Ten years later, Ariosto, in his sixth *Satira*, addressed to Bembo, offered one of the earliest examples of the noun *umanista*, which in its original meaning was interchangeable with "poet." The Renaissance evidently believed in a human dialogue, which is also, as the author puts on new clothes at the threshold of his study, a religious dialogue, with the masters of the Greco-Roman past. He asks for reasons, and they answer him. The fruits of this courtesy are evident even today in our museums and libraries.

Machiavelli was not only a philosopher and historian, whose name even now commands our attention, but a literary artist, whose comedy *La Mandragola* is still holding the stage. It is the "humanist" and artist therefore who, with his power of creative transformation, sets the example for interpretation which Renaissance studies must learn to follow if they are really to penetrate to the heart of their theme. It is easy, in the first fit of enthusiasm, to see resemblances to classical antiquity in some favorite Cinquecento masterpiece. But then scholarship rightly introduces its qualifications, its demurrals. In the cauldron of that catalytic alchemy, the similarities evaporate, the two worlds are felt as hermetically sealed against any but their own peculiar values. Renaissance studies become a separate discipline, a separate department. The classicist, safe once more in his nest, breathes a sigh of relief at the departure of the intruding cuckoo. And is not the cuckoo for her part glad to get away?

It is necessary to introduce at this point a salutary word of Mikhail

Bakhtin: "The author may not remember, but the genre remembers." Obviously, the greater the artist the greater will be his power to draw on the inherited and accumulated resources of his medium. At this level, he becomes an interpreter of tradition whose testimony is even more valuable than that of the scholar, since few scholars are geniuses to this degree. This truth was appreciated in Alexandria, when the foundations of scholarship in the modern sense were being laid. It was, at least in the first and second generations of the history of the Library, clear that poet and scholar were ideally one. It was appreciated in the Renaissance, while *umanista* meant the same thing as *poeta*. But even in the Greek world these related vocations were torn asunder. The unfortunate imitation of this worst side of the ancient legacy has had the present disastrous consequences for the study of the Classics. Never in the history of our civilization can so few have been able to read Latin and Greek with any degree of fluency and enjoyment.

Although therefore a richer explanation of the iconography of Dosso's painting is available, the ethos of Paul Barolsky's remarks is one that, in his turn, the classical scholar will do well to note. In his magnificent *The Age of Humanism* (London 1963) André Chastel has emphasized that the prevailing tone of Renaissance literature is comic or serio-comic, even in those engaged in the forefront of the controversies of their time, and here we need look no further than Erasmus and More. This has important implications for both its form and its content. Its form will so often be that of the dialogue, and hence the significance of Professor Barolsky's mention of Lucian in the passage quoted. Its content will be fantasy; mock-heroic, ironically didactic, witty, ruefully (and sometimes joyfully) conscious of the gap between ideal and reality. It will juxtapose crudity and delicacy, secular and religious. It will forever be aware that the king and the clown have the same horoscope.

The prominence in the Renaissance tradition of symbols such as laughter, festivity, love, the common meal in all its bounty, dislocations of space and time away from the everyday, the three levels of heaven, earth and hell, crowning and uncrowning, death from life and life from death, the "grotesque body," masking and unmasking, metamorphosis, utopia, the pastoral: these are tokens that the serio-comic, far from depending on the random association of ideas, exploits quite definite aspects of popular culture, sacred and profane in one.

Renaissance art evidently plumbs these deep wellsprings, whatever the courtly refinements which may at times disguise its humble origins. So does Dante's *Comedy*, which because of language, theme, style and learning, should be regarded as the first major (and of course

unsurpassed) work of Renaissance poetry. Even Petrarch's *Africa*, the epic of the heroic struggle against Hannibal, is peculiarly in debt to Ovid, and comes alive only when it versifies a romantic episode in Livy.

But the serio-comic is also a major feature of the Greco-Roman imagination. If Lucian is relevant to Dosso's picture, so is Plato. The *Symposium* ends with the argument that the truly scientific poet will be just as good at comedy as he is at tragedy, which is a fairly broad hint about the tone which that particular dialogue is meant to strike. The mixed emotions of the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*, like those of Pindar's first *Nemean*, find an echo in Dosso's painting in the Cini Collection *Riso, Ira, Pianta e Paura* where, as Professor Barolsky notes, "various emotions are comically mixed."

In late fifth-century Athens, Euripides' Pentheus had already been a figure of fun. Pentheus had laughed at the new god, and Dionysus had laughed at Pentheus' efforts to contain his power. And laughter is the ultimate reaction of Boccaccio's Penteo to all his sufferings in the *Teseida* (1341?), as it is that of the executed More at the conclusion of Ellis Heywood's dialogue *Il Moro* (1556). The dying Mercutio's punning self-mockery in *Romeo and Juliet*, like that of the dying John of Gaunt in *Richard II*, is part of the same tradition, of which Shakespeare is a supreme master. It is one of his closest links with the spirit of classical antiquity.

The serio-comic style, as we see from its deployment by the philosophers, does not surrender its claim to communicate some kind of truth. But it is a larger truth than that of the academic's abstractions, which is one reason why those undergraduate essays discovering that Socrates does not refute Thrasymachus in the first book of the *Republic* are so silly. Of course Socrates does not refute Thrasymachus at the theoretical level. But life is lived authentically — not by theorists, but by people making decisions. The ultimate question is one of character, ethical: would you want to be Thrasymachus or Socrates? At this level, the answer is obvious. Plato's form is not dispensable and even harmful sugar around some distasteful and ineffective philosophical pill. It is part of what he is trying to say, one of the reasons why he slept with the mimes of Sophron under his pillow.

If classical literature therefore is to speak to students faced with the ambiguities of the twenty-first century, it must be cultivated with a broader range of response in mind than that of simple admiration, or simple dislike. Its profound roots in the undifferentiated primitive must be traced, in a soil where either / or does not make too much sense. It must be re-assessed, not merely by the study of the great

scholars, but also by a civilized awareness of the artistic and literary tradition, particularly as that tradition was developed at the Renaissance.

The Renaissance had of course its pedants. Bernard Weinberg twenty years ago traced the melancholy history of their incomprehension and dogmatism in the face of the masterpieces of their age. But it had too a series of brilliant artists whose works constitute an implied poetic. Ariosto, for example, evidently understood the ancient epic tradition and its paradoxical debt to Callimachus far better than his critics. His elegy *De diversis amoribus* and even his sixth *Satira* already mentioned are the proof of that. So did Tasso. Racine, who wrote *Les Plaideurs* as well as his great tragic masterpieces, knew more by poetic instinct about ancient tragedy than the French Academy. These names are excluded from histories of classical scholarship. It is time they were there, or at least time that a broad humane culture was regarded as more important to the budding specialist than the dim preparation for settling hoti's — or Vasari's — business.

The Editor of this present collection of papers about different facets of the Renaissance is a firm believer in the study of the Classics as an aspect of *literae humaniores*. In this regard, he would even enter a plea for the despised arts of Latin and Greek verse composition. At least they taught their practitioners how to scan. At best, they inspired some sort of feeling for Latin and Greek as vehicles of poetic thought. They were a last tribute to the original meaning of "umanista," a last vestige of the Alexandrian sensibility.

But the chief lesson to be learned from such a collection is the need to expand our horizons, whether we are classicists or Renaissance scholars. The greatest commentator on Virgil is Dante, the greatest commentator on Ovid — Shakespeare. But these are matters of mutual concern! It has been noted that Michelangelo in the Sistine *Creation of Eve* made the figure of God so big that He would burst the frame if He stood up. The art historian who tells us this seems to regard it as a flaw. "Michelangelo must have found it difficult to get a proper view of his work." Certainly she does not remind her readers that exactly the same was true of Phidias' statue of the seated Zeus at Olympia, who would have pierced the roof of the temple by rising to his feet. Both artists were trying to express the majesty of the Creator in physical terms by age-old methods. Did Michelangelo consciously know this? Does it matter? The genre remembered, even if he did not.

But the scholar must remember too! We need dialogue, between classicists who understand better the achievements of Greco-Roman

civilization, and Renaissance specialists who are less ready to separate the branch from the tree in the name of a scholarship too attentive to leaves and twigs. Michelangelo's youthful *Pietà* in St. Peter's could never have been sculpted in fifth-century Athens. But the student of Attic white-ground funerary lecythoi feels the kinship of spirit all the same.

When the author of *Paradise Lost* utters his prefatory strictures against the use of rhyme, he is taking sides as a scholar and theorist in a well-known Renaissance controversy. When, in spite of them, he uses rhyming lines to describe Eve's plucking of the forbidden fruit, he is paying homage as a poet to a primitive religious assonance as old as, and older than, the Iguvine Tablets, or *Bereshith bara*. . . . Once again the genre has remembered.

This kind of learning ought not to be left to the comparatists. All study of literature is comparative literature. All study of literature must be continually cross-fertilized by reference to the arts of painting, sculpture, music. Every scholar must be able to say: "Tutto mi transferisco in loro." The *uomo universale* remains a valid ideal even in our age.

In an important passage of his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* Jacob Burckhardt remarks of Pico della Mirandola:

He was the only man who loudly and vigorously defended the truth and science of all ages against the one-sided worship of classical antiquity. He knew how to value not only Averroës and the Jewish investigators, but also the scholastic writers of the Middle Ages, according to the matter of their writings. He seems to hear them say: "We shall live for ever, not in the schools of word-catchers, but in the circle of the wise, where they talk not of the mother of Andromache or of the sons of Niobe, but of the deeper causes of things human and divine; he who looks closely will see that even the barbarians had intelligence (*mercurium*), not on the tongue but in the breast."

There is not much danger of a one-sided worship of classical antiquity in our time. We are all barbarians, and so must hope that Pico della Mirandola's words are true. It is to his ideal of learning and his view of the dignity of man that this collection is dedicated.

An unsere deutschen Leser ergeht folgender besonderer Aufruf: Es ist an der Zeit. Was noch immer an W. Jaegers Drittem Humanismus lebensfähig und lebensbejahend bleibt, das soll jetzt überprüft, vertieft und erneut werden.



Once again, I must thank Mrs. Mary Ellen Fryer for her labors in putting on line our contributors' texts. Mr. Carl Kibler of the Printing Services Office, University of Illinois, supervised the PENTA side of our operations with his usual common sense and perseverance.

Frances Stickney Newman's unceasing toil made the whole thing possible.

J. K. Newman